



Weekly Health Tip:

Cooking Tips for One

By Holly Larson, MS, RD

It can be tricky when cooking for one (or even two) to make the most of your ingredients and to minimize dishes — particularly when many recipes focus on making a meal for a family and serve four to six people. But just because you have a smaller household doesn't mean you should abandon the kitchen for takeout.

"The best part of cooking for one is that there are no worries about what anyone else wants for dinner. You have the flexibility to enjoy beans with salsa and avocado or a quick omelet with veggies for dinner if you want," says Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Spokesperson Marisa Moore, MBA, RDN, LD.

The first step to dinner-for-one success is to make cooking healthy meals a priority. Planning ahead and arming yourself with a few tips and tricks will put you on the path to triumph in the kitchen.

According to Moore, the best strategy when cooking for one is to become friends with your freezer. "Instead of scaling down, cook up full recipes: cook once, eat twice. Save time, money and clean up by freezing soups, chili, pasta dishes and extra vegetables," she says. "Pull these 'frozen meals' out when you don't feel like cooking or just need a quick meal."

Here are some more kitchen tips for one:

Grains

- Cook a batch of whole grains such as brown rice or barley and freeze in individual portions using a muffin pan. Once frozen, the discs can be stored in a zip-top bag.

- Have a six-pack of whole-grain English muffins or a whole loaf of bread? Tuck those extras into the freezer for another day; wrap them tightly in plastic wrap to prevent freezer burn.
- Visit the bulk bins at your local health food and grocery stores. You can buy exactly what you need with no waste and it's often less expensive per pound. In addition to grains, you can score a deal on dried herbs and spices as well as nuts, seeds and dried beans.

Veggies and Fruits

- "If you're not able to go food shopping a few days a week (most of us aren't), embrace frozen produce," says Moore. "Frozen produce can be just as nutritious as fresh and it's there when you need it. Just choose options without added sauces and sugar." Since they're already chopped up, frozen fruits and veggies are ready to add to smoothies, soups and stir-fries. And because they're frozen, there is no rush to use them before they spoil.
- Bulk bags of fruits and veggies are only a better deal if you eat them before they spoil. Only buy what you can reasonably eat before the produce perishes: take extra grapes or cherries out of the bag and pare down that bunch of bananas to what you'll eat.
- "Be strategic. Enjoy your most perishable fresh produce like berries and spinach early in the week. Save heartier produce like cabbage, carrots and potatoes for meals later in the week," suggests Moore.

Protein: Meat, Poultry, Eggs, Beans

- Eggs can make a meal happen in a flash, anytime! They are an excellent source of protein and contain a bounty of nutrients such as vitamin D and choline. You can hard-boil a few on the weekend to have as an easy breakfast, snack or quick salad addition.
- Buy a whole package of meat or poultry and wrap individual portions in freezer-safe paper; label each with the date and contents.
- A potato masher can easily tame a can of pinto beans into delicious refried beans — a pinch of cumin, garlic and chili powder and you're ready to eat!